Title:
Step by Step: The Power of the Protest March

Lesson By:
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Grade Level/ Subject Areas:
6th-9th Grades
Language Arts and Social Sciences

Duration of Lesson:
45 minutes
2-3 class periods; 2 weeks with extension

Content Standards:
SS.08.CG.05 Understand how citizens can make their voices heard in the political process.

SS.08.CG.06.01 Identify and give examples of how groups and organizations can influence government policy or decisions and describe how these actions can lead to such influence.

EL.07.WR.10 Write for different purposes and to a specific audience or person, adjusting style and tone as necessary to engage the interest of the reader.

Lesson Abstract:
Students will learn about the famous marches of Mohandas Gandhi and Cesar Chavez, including the Epic March in South Africa, the Salt March in India, and the Sacramento March in California. They will research the impact and historical significance of each march, and will present their findings to the class. Finally, they will have the option to design and participate in their own march in order to make a statement about an issue that directly affects them and their community.

Guiding Questions:
What role have marches as a form of nonviolent action (such as those undertaken by Gandhi and Chavez) played in the past both in the United States and around the world?

What is the effect of a large group of people standing together for a common cause?
Content Essay:

“One who is free from hatred requires no sword.” (Gandhi, 2009, p. 97)

When faced with injustice or inequality, people choose to respond in very different ways. Some become angry or defiant, and lash out at those around them. Some become hopeless and settle into a submissive state while learning to live with the sting of indignity. Some simply shut down, becoming ghost-like entities moving from task to task, day to day, without really feeling much of anything. Yet others respond by taking action against such injustice in a nonviolent manner. This act of nonviolence can take many different forms, from acts of civil disobedience to strikes to speeches. It can serve to empower the participant, while at the same time enlightening the oppressor. It is powerful, and is accessible to anyone who cares to harness such power. In this lesson, we will focus on the idea of marching as a form of nonviolent protest and action.

Marching has strong roots in nonviolent protest. There have been many movements over the centuries that have used marching as a way to make a statement, garner support, and build a sense of momentum for the cause. From women’s suffrage to anti-apartheid, from the tearing down of the Berlin Wall to worker’s rights, from Florida’s Coalition of Immokalee Workers to LGBTQ groups nationwide, marching has provided people with a physical expression of support or disapproval that can be both powerful and impactful. Marching has given voices to those who otherwise wouldn’t be heard.

Mohandas Gandhi used marches in just this way. His two great marches, the Epic March in South Africa as well as the Salt March in India, were both centered around righting injustice (Sethia, 2012). Gandhi worked tirelessly for Indian rights in South Africa. His efforts covered a wide variety of topics, including marriage rights, forced registration and identification, treatment of indentured servants, and Indian immigration. When General Smuts, the British authority with whom Gandhi was attempting to negotiate positive change for Indians, continuously broke his promises and went back on is word, Gandhi organized his first major march. It was called the Epic March, in the words of Dr. Tara Sethia (2012), “because through it the interests of various Indian constituencies in South Africa converged in a heroic expression of satyagraha” (p. 72). On November 6, 1913, over 2200 Indians from all walks of life, including women, children, and indentured servants began to march. Gandhi called them “satyagrahis”, meaning nonviolent practitioners committed to using acts of civil disobedience in the struggle for change (Gandhi, 2009). Their objective was to cross over the border from Natal to the Transvaal in an effort to engage in civil disobedience, as Indian immigration into the Transvaal at that time was considered illegal. This march also served as a platform from which Gandhi could make a statement about the treatment of Indians in South Africa in general. Gandhi and his satyagrahis never made it to their destination; he was arrested and the marchers were detained in Natal. Yet he succeeded in nonviolently altering the course of Indian history in South Africa.

Gandhi’s second large-scale march was even more successful. It was called the Salt March (Sethia, 2012), as the goal was to engage in an act of civil disobedience at its conclusion by making salt through desalinization at the coast. This was in response to the taxes the British placed on salt when selling it to the Indians from their own homeland. The tax had created unrest in the people of India, especially as it was seen as yet another form of oppression for the Indian people. Gandhi clarified this issue, as cited in Dr. Sethia’s book (2012),

Next to air and water, salt is perhaps the greatest necessity of life. It is the only condiment of the poor... There is no article like salt outside water by taxing which the State can reach even the starving millions, the sick, the maimed and the utterly
helpless. The tax constitutes therefore the most inhuman poll tax that ingenuity of man can devise (p. 156).

Instead of simply calling on people to make their own salt, Gandhi embarked on a 24-day march to the seashore, stopping to educate others and to ask them to join in the protest of the salt laws by manufacturing their own salt. He began with 78 satyagrahis by his side, and ended the march with several thousand participants. Throughout his journey, he was truly able to build momentum for the salt movement. Each step the citizens of India took toward the sea built up a sense of anticipation both in their own countrymen and around the world. This made their arrival, and subsequent acts of disobedience, much more visible and meaningful than if they had simply done so privately or in small community movements.

Cesar Chavez also experienced the power of marching as a source of nonviolent resistance. While working with the farmworkers in California on a strike against grape growers, he organized a 250-mile march from the town of Delano to the state capitol, Sacramento (Orosco, 2008). The workers left Delano 70 people strong, and reached Sacramento 24 days later as a crowd of 10,000. Chavez had many reasons for embarking on this journey, including taking part in a pilgrimage, creating a sense of penitence, and engaging in revolutionary tactics (Orosco, 2008). However, he also wanted to make the plight of the farmworkers visible, and to convince those in power to take their demands seriously. He maintained that, “When you lose your sense of life and justice, you lose your strength” (Chavez & Stavans, 2008, p. 160). Marching was one way for many different races and ages of people to regain that sense.

In recognizing the power of the march, we are also recognizing the power of the masses to make a statement and accomplish a goal nonviolently. History has shown that by building a sense of anticipation - by taking part in this type of pilgrimage - a group of individuals can become a movement to be taken seriously. While there is more to the practice of nonviolence than this alone, the beauty of a march lies in its accessibility, in its universal language. It is something virtually anyone can participate in, from elders to children, from farmworkers to Indian peasants, and from teachers to students. Through the study of successful marches in global history, we can begin to apply both their meaning and their practice to our own lives.

References:


Teaching Activities:

1. Show students *March Together* (digital story) in order to get them focused and inspired for the lesson to come.
2. Provide students with “fact cards” created from the information presented in the content essay. Create these cards by choosing three facts you’d like to emphasize from each march. Ensure that you have three cards, one for each march mentioned.

   Ex:
   The Salt March
   - Led by Gandhi in 1930
   - Preceded a Salt Satyagraha that included the making of salt at the edge of the sea
   - Lasted 24 days

3. Have students discuss marches in small groups, and then allow them to choose a march they are most interested in to research online. *Optional: allow students to choose another nonviolent march they are interested in other than the three options provided. These could be chosen from the students’ own research, or may come from the list below:
   - Women’s suffrage
   - Anti-apartheid
   - LGBTQ marches
   - Coalition of Immokalee Workers
   - Immigration marches
   - Berlin Wall

4. Using images and information found during their research, have students get together into groups (based on the march they focused on) to create a poster representing what they learned. Discuss as a whole class as needed.

   Extension: Discuss why protesters marched and ask students to come up with a list of issues they are passionate about. Have them organize a march in their community, and facilitate the discussion of logistics (route, signs, conduct, motivations, where and when, etc.). Work with community members to endorse and schedule the march. Debrief with students after participating in it.

**Materials Needed:**

*March Together* digital story
Online access for each student
Index cards
Poster paper